# National Sickle Cell Awareness Month

**What is Sickle Cell Disease?**
Sickle Cell Disease is an inherited disorder of the red blood cells characterized by abnormally shaped red blood cells. The red blood cells become hard and pointed instead of soft and round. This abnormality can result in painful episodes, serious infections, chronic anemia, and damage to body organs. These effects can however vary from person to person depending on the type of sickle cell disease the person has.

**What is Sickle Cell Trait?**
If you have sickle cell trait, you have inherited the gene for sickle cell disease. Sickle cell trait does not turn into sickle cell disease. If someone has sickle cell trait and their partner has sickle cell trait they may produce a child with sickle cell disease. There are about 2.5 million people in America with sickle cell trait.

**What medical problems are caused by sickle cell disease?**
Lung tissue damage, pain episodes and stroke. The blockage of blood flow caused by sickle cells also causes damage to most organs including the spleen, kidneys and liver.

**Do we all have the same chance of inheriting sickle cell disease?**
**No.** In the United States, most cases occur among African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. About one in every 500 African-Americans has sickle cell disease. It also affects people of Arabian, Greek, Maltese, Italian, Sardinian, Turkish and Indian ancestry.

**Is there a cure?**
There is no universal cure for sickle cell disease. Research in gene therapy, the ultimate universal cure, is currently underway.

**What are some promising treatment developments?**
The first effective drug treatment for adults with severe sickle cell anemia was reported in early 1995, when a study conducted by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute showed that daily doses of the anticancer drug hydroxyurea reduced the frequency of painful crises and of acute chest syndrome in these patients. Patients taking the drug also needed fewer blood transfusions.

**Division of Health Education**

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**What are some things a person with sickle cell anemia can do to maintain good health?**
Regular health maintenance is critical for people with sickle cell anemia. Proper nutrition, good hygiene, bed rest, protection against infections, and avoidance of other stresses all are important in maintaining good health and preventing complications. Regular visits to a physician or clinic that provides comprehensive care are necessary to identify early changes in the patient's health and ensure that the person receives immediate treatment.

**Is it possible to detect Sickle Cell Anemia in an Unborn Baby?**
**Yes.** By sampling the amniotic fluid or tissue taken from the placenta, doctors can tell whether a fetus has sickle cell anemia or sickle cell trait. This test can be done as early as the first trimester I of pregnancy.

**What should future parents know?**
People who are planning to become parents should know whether they are carriers of the sickle cell gene, and, if they are, they may want to seek genetic counseling. The counselor can tell prospective parents what the chances are that their child will have sickle cell trait or sickle cell anemia. Accurate diagnostic tests and information are available from health departments, neighborhood health centers, medical centers and clinics that care for Individuals with sickle cell anemia.

*Information adapted from the American Sickle Cell Anemia Association, and the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation 2005*